

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to you about HB5558 - an act concerning services for persons with autism spectrum disorders. I am the mother of a 16 year old son with Asperger's Syndrome, a high functioning form of autism. My son is a Junior at Fairfield Warde High School and is taking two AP courses and three honors courses along with Wind Ensemble and Spanish. He is a very smart young man and is very capable. He has a big interest in politics and will argue policy with family members for the fun of it and he often wins due to his amazing memory for detail. He has a great sense of humor. My son's autism impacts him much more in the social realm and he struggles socially. He cannot read social cues very well and as a result he often avoids social interactions because he cannot tell when people are getting annoyed or angry with him until they start yelling. You can imagine this might make keeping a job difficult for him. My fear for him is that he will get into a good college and then struggle to remain there due to social difficulties with other students or faculty members. I believe he will earn a degree eventually because many colleges have supports for students with high-functioning autism.. However, my second big concern is that he will be able to retain a job once he gets one. Interviews will be very difficult for him. He has extreme difficulty looking people in the eye and struggles to express thoughts and as a result stutters when nervous. None of these behaviors are conducive to getting a job. He also does not do well when routines are broken and he can be rigid and inflexible when routines have changed. This is due to anxiety about how to handle new environments. He can work through these issues, but he will need time, an understanding boss and perhaps some job coaching. He has the ability to contribute a lot to our community.

I am also writing as a former Special Education teacher. As a high school teacher, I had to prepare many young people with high functioning autism for post secondary education or for the workplace. For most, the biggest concerns were having enough time to get used to new routines, plans for major changes in routines and mentoring when inflexibility interfered with job performance or social interactions. Difficulties navigating conflicts with roommates was also a big concern for many of these students. With a mentor who understands autism, many of these young people went on to successfully enroll in post-secondary education. These days many colleges and universities have supports for those on the autism spectrum, and if they don't families won't choose those schools. It is later, in the work place, living situations and recreational activities that I feel adults with high functioning autism will need the most support and it is not readily available, particularly for those with limited resources.

I am sure you are aware that 70% of this population will be underemployed. For many, difficulties with social skills will result in a cycle of getting a job and losing it due to inappropriate responses to an employer or co-worker. A job coach could help employers understand behavior and our adults learn to behave differently. I really hope that you will support this bill. These adults with high a functioning ASD can be very productive citizens. They just need a little help along the way.

Sincerely,

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